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# Enhancing Impact: Aligning University Engagement Efforts with Community Needs

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# Enhancing Impact: Aligning University Engagement Efforts with Community Needs

**Abstract**

This presentation was delivered at the Coalition of Urban Metropolitan Universities Conference in Washington, D.C., in October 2016.

**Keywords**

community engagement, higher education, community, university, university-community partnerships

**Disciplines**

Higher Education

# Enhancing Impact: Aligning University Engagement Efforts with Community Needs



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CUMU  
October 24, 2016

# Objectives

- Why alignment?
- Why at VCU?
- Models for universities addressing  
“wicked problems”
- VCU’s process
- Thinking Big Dialogue:  
challenges and our approach

# Preliminary Planning Group

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**#CUMU2016**

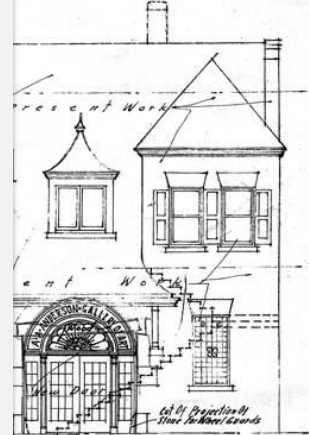
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*It is now apparent that the conditions prevailing in urban centers embody many of our most critical national, state and local problems. ... Rarely has any university been accorded a more timely opportunity to confront on an intellectual and practical level the social environment which surrounds it. . The urban environment offers the university great resources. Concurrently the urban university has an obligation to participate in the solution of urban problems.*

*(Wayne Commission, 1967, p. 12)*







To watch a group of bees form a hive is to see a frenzy of different interests coalesce into a single, clear thought.

Jason Castro, Scientific American

# Universities Addressing “Wicked Problems”

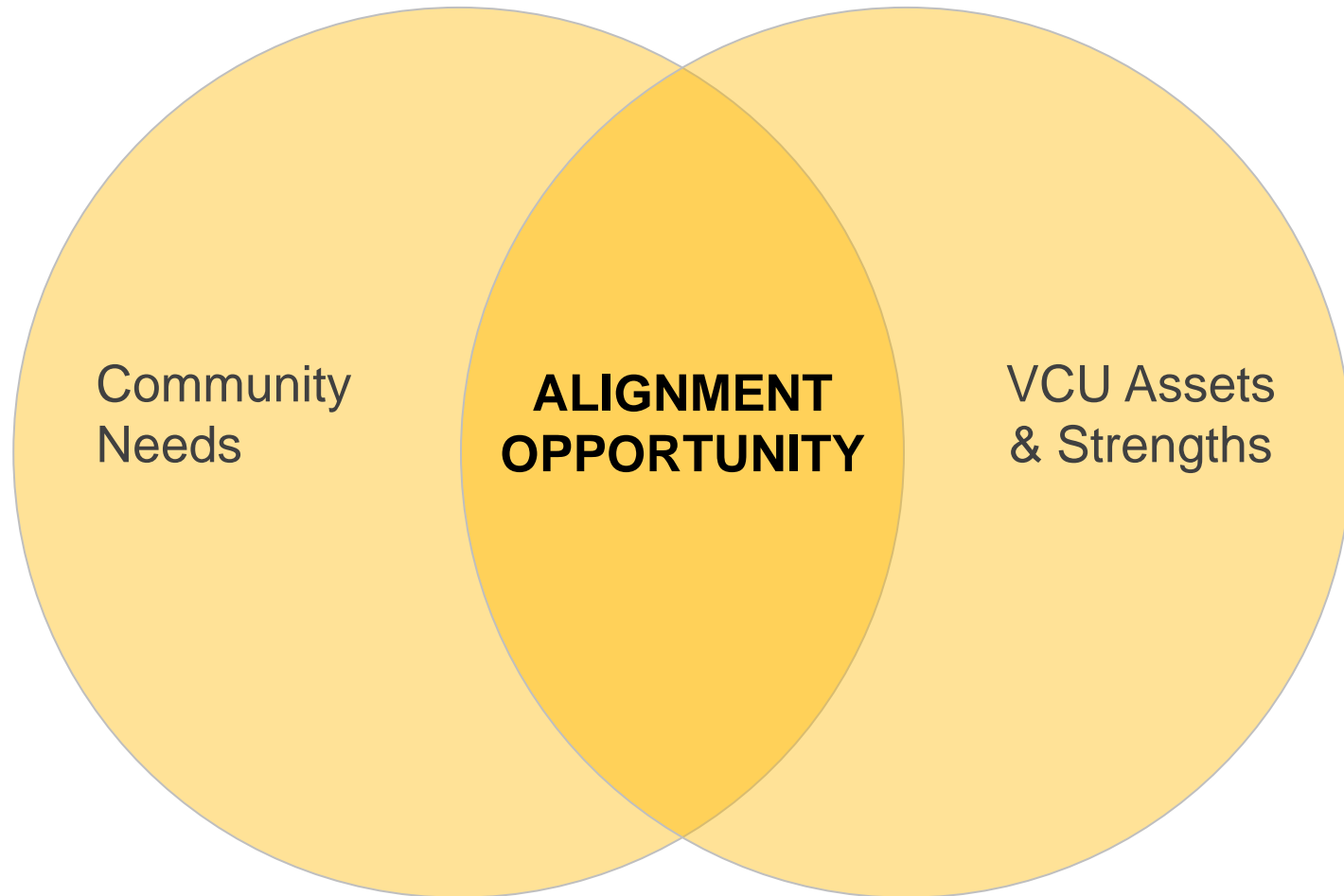
## University of California Los Angeles: Grand Challenges

*“Ambitious research projects that connect hundreds of faculty, students, community members and leading experts across every field to solve society’s toughest problems. By setting the sights of many on a common goal, we will have more impact than we have ever had before.”*

## University of Pittsburgh: Centers for Urban Engagement

*“The centers will focus on activity specific to the needs, interests, and input of the neighborhood that map directly onto the work of Pitt researchers, staff, and students. Developing an even stronger culture of service and engagement is one of our strategic priorities and affords us the opportunity to create knowledge that transforms lives”*





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# Choosing a Focus Issue: Criteria



- Focuses on identified community need
- Involves collaboration with community partners
- Builds on current community goals/strategies
- Is consistent with VCU assets, expertise and experience
- Can involve multiple departments across the campuses
- Incorporates student learning, research and, when appropriate, patient care
- Has potential for measurable change within 3-10 years

# Choosing a Focus Issue: Process

August 2015: VCU hosts 1<sup>st</sup> Community Conversations for strategic alignment

2015-2016: Community further identifies pressing regional needs; VCU begins cataloging partnerships and resources

May 2016: VCU faculty and panel experts explore health and education issues

June 2016:  
Community leadership input

October 2016: national search  
for Executive Director

2017: Critical issues finalized by advisory board & steering committee

# August 2015

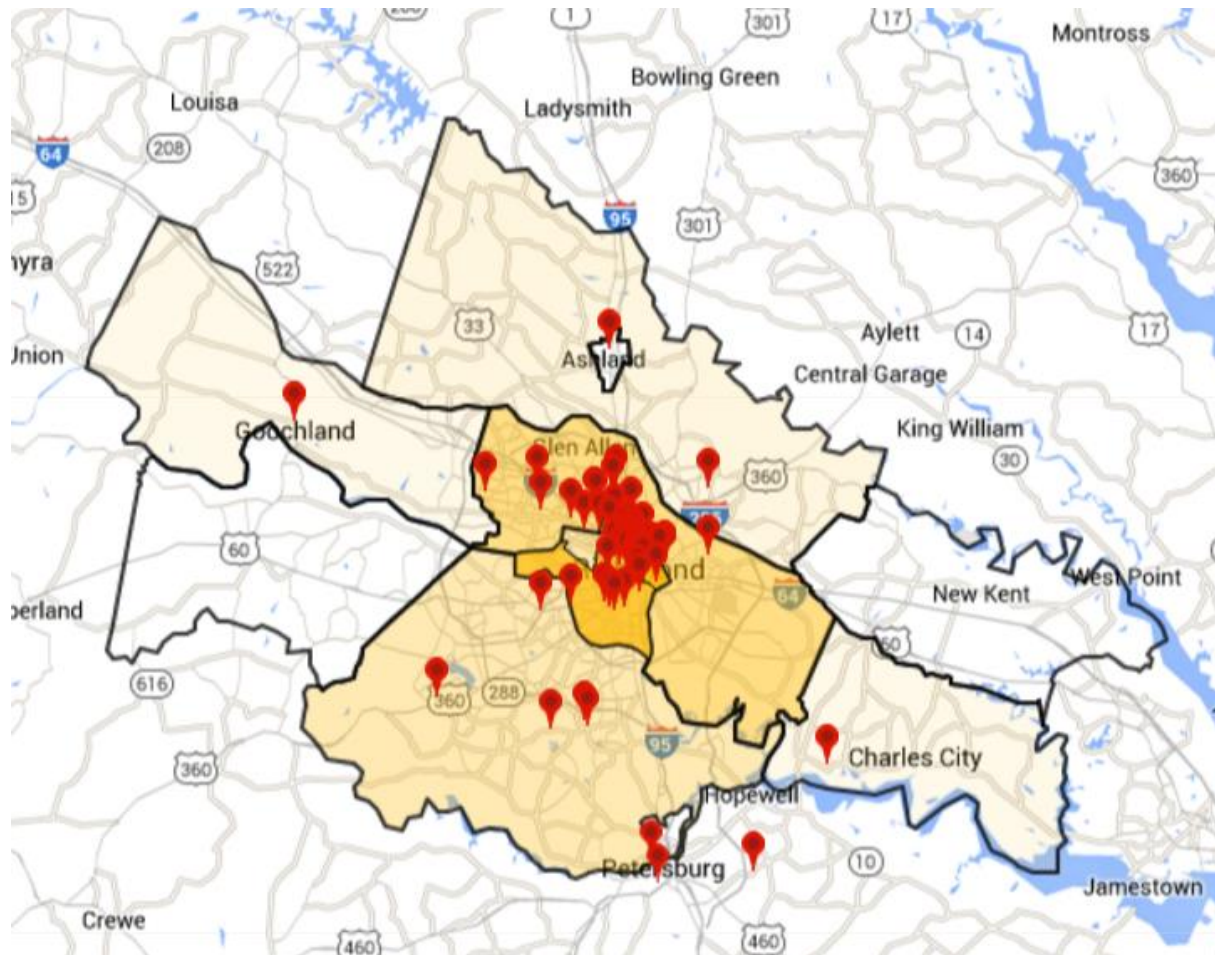
- 50+ university and community leaders convened
- Represented broad range of community priorities and concerns
- Participants reviewed an integrated analysis of 24 community-developed needs assessments conducted over the past 10 years and focused on Richmond/central Virginia
- 2 priority areas identified K-12 education and health access

K-12 Education

Health Access



# 2015-2016: Cataloguing VCU Partnerships

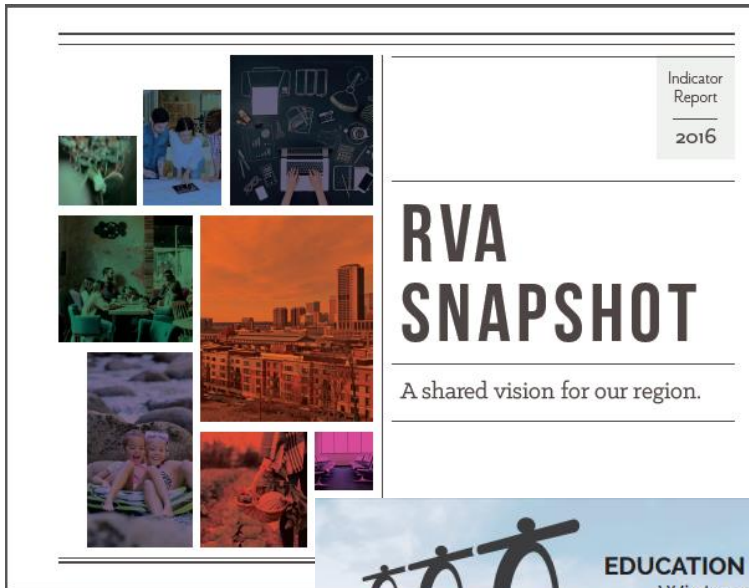


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# 2015-2016: Community-Identified Priorities



# May 2016:

## Faculty Meet with Community Experts

- Community meetings over 2 days to begin prioritizing specific issues within the areas of health and education that VCU could partner with the Richmond community to address
- 90+ participants from over 30 VCU departments and community organizations
- Community panelists with expertise in ongoing community initiatives addressing K-12 education and health outcomes
- VCU faculty and staff with interests in improving education and health outcomes in Richmond

# May 2016:

## Faculty Meet with Community Experts

Round-table discussions: panelists and participants explored opportunities for students, faculty, and staff from across disciplines to work in partnership with the community on these initiatives

### Health Issues

- Food insecurity and nutrition
- Lifelong wellness
- Health literacy
- Physical activity

### Education Issues

- PreK-12 Attendance
- Kindergarten Readiness
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Reading Level



# June 2016:

## Community Leaders Discussion

- President invited community leaders and key members of VCU and VCU Health System (VCUHS) to review work to date and to seek input further refining next steps for the work with the identified focus areas of health and education
- 3 Key Recommendations:
  1. Consider working in a more integrated manner to parallel more comprehensive and coordinated work in the community with children, youth and families.
  2. Consider aligning this effort with coordinated public-private partnership already growing in Richmond's East End.
  3. As a major institution of higher education and community partner, take the opportunity to be bold and transformative in this work

# Next Steps:

- National search for Executive Director for Center for Urban Communities under way
- Exploring shared physical space
- Develop advisory board made of internal and external constituents to provide guidance and oversight
- Build on a series of significant commitments that multiple VCU units made in recent preparation for a Choice Neighborhood grant in partnership with the city to strategically aligned work in Richmond's East End
  - Enhanced case management
  - Evaluation of collective program interventions
  - Community leader development
  - Training and job opportunities to East End residents who will be working in VCU's \$1B+ construction program
- Announce the initial focus work to the university and broader community and host a presentation with expert panel speakers

Thinking Big Dialogue:  
What keeps us up at night . . .

*How do we choose a  
single issue?*

Q1

# How do we choose a single issue?

## Challenge

VCU is a large complex organization—coordinating across multiple departments is difficult

Across the university are several existing efforts attempting to have a collective impact on various issues

External to VCU similar collective impact efforts are happening throughout the community

Institutional history with community

Resources needed to fund the space, staff the initiative, and create a supporting infrastructure

## Our Approach

Utilize existing infrastructure and networks to identify VCU faculty and staff with shared interests in improving certain outcomes in the community.

Plan to invest time and energy into:

- focusing on bolstering existing efforts rather than duplicating or co-opting;
- communicating the distinction of this initiative when compared to others; and
- remaining in continuous dialogue to continue to understand the scope of efforts happening internal and external to the university.

Begin with a community-identified need.

Engage early and often.

Rely on community expertise regarding ongoing community-based initiatives.

Seek funding opportunities that align with existing community collaborations.

Builds on significant commitments that VCU departments have already invested in the community.



Thinking Big Dialogue: What  
keeps us up at night . . .

*How do we think about  
shared spaces?*

Q2



***Thank You!***

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